Native American History on the San Mateo Coast

Prehistory

Archaeological findings from Año Nuevo SP and other peninsula coastal sites reveal a succession of several cultural periods spanning the Early, Middle, and Late Holocene ages. These sites have provided interesting insights into the local cultural prehistory and their adaptive responses to episodes of significant environmental change.

The study area overlays a larger fabric of dynamic cultural transformations that began sometime over 12,000 years ago, when people first arrived along the west coast of North America. Legacies of dramatic (even cataclysmic) episodes of environmental changes have lead to the recognition of four major climatic shifts that have transpired during the time of human occupation. These changes define the Late Pleistocene, Early, Middle, and Late Holocene epochs.

Approximately 10,000 years ago, during the Early Holocene period, the progressively rising sea began to encroach up the level coastal terrace terrain that once extended considerably farther offshore. The sea reached its present height by Middle Holocene times, some 6,000 years ago. With the stabilization of sea level, marine and terrestrial plants and animals developed distinctive behaviors and territorial distributions that allowed for predictable, patterned resources important to human societies. Cyclical patterns of seasonal food availability, and repetitive use of these resources by the early people, have resulted in the distribution of extensive archaeological deposits at locations where residential and/or task-specific activities became established.

During the Middle Holocene (6700 to 3400 BC), stone mortars and pestles appear in the archaeological record. These artifacts were used for acorn processing, indicating that acorns had increased in importance as a dietary staple. This addition augmented an earlier reliance on hard seeds (tarweeds, clarkia seeds, and others) that were milled through the use of handstones and milling slabs. With the increasing reliance on acorns as a food staple, access to productive oak woodlands became a primary factor in the subsistence economy.

Regionally, the Monterey chert outcrop at Año Nuevo State Reserve came to function as the principal source for chipped stone tool material, including projectile points, for coastal people. These robust point forms suggest that there was an emphasis on hunting large game, most likely tule elk.

A specific site in Quiroste Valley (Whitehouse Creek) dates to this time. By the end of the Middle Holocene, the overall artifact assemblage along with a combined dietary focus on ocean mussels, marine mammals, and deer or elk became the precursors to a consistent reliance on coastal resources that persisted through most of the Late Holocene. The ancestral Ohlone Indian people of the area lived in a landscape of great ecological diversity. Their environment brought them in close proximity to marine, sandy beach, rocky shore, tidal and freshwater marsh, grassland prairie, oak grassland savanna, riparian, chaparral, mixed hardwood, and evergreen forest habitats.

Archaeological evidence from sites in the area shows that productive ecological zones, in terms of native subsistence needs, involved littoral and grassland habitats concentrated along the narrow coastal terraces and upland meadows in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Within the

upland meadows interspersed along Ben Lomond Ridge above Big Basin, archaeological deposits do not reveal any reliance on interior San Francisco Bay resources, but do indicate a close dependence on coastal resources. It is likely that the meadows concentrated game into narrow resource patches and repetitive seasonal use of the uplands accounts for the substantial depth of archaeological deposits in these areas. The types of bones found in these sites suggest that this seasonal foraging occurred in the summer. In contrast, a contemporaneous site at Año Nuevo contained abundant adult and juvenile northern fur seal bones that point to a winter occupation of the coastal terrace.

The ancestral Ohlone used a large number of plants for food, medicine and tools. Acorns were a staple although the rugged terrain and dispersal of oak forest within the coastal zone effectively constrained access to acorns. Sporadic distributions of bedrock mortar milling stations along the upper ridgelines and slopes on the interior Santa Cruz Mountains and within Big Basin Redwoods SP reveal the laborious extremes that coastal people experienced to add acorns to their diet.

Although the ancestral Ohlone did not develop a maritime tradition, offshore marine resources were actively pursued. Most open coastal sites contain the remains of mollusks, fish, a variety of sea animals, and ocean-going sea birds such as cormorant, pelican, tufted puffin, marbled murrelet, and others. While the total volume of the shell represented at open coastal sites within the study area varied in accordance with the depth of archaeological deposits and the duration of site occupation, the range of species present was found to be remarkably consistent through time. Most notably, the overall contribution of mollusks to the diet remained consistent.

In addition to the shellfish, the hunting patterns along the peninsula coast changed to include different mammals from both land and sea. Marine mammals were hunted with clubs, harpoons, spears and darts. Elephant seal bones are absent from the regional archaeological record, although many other marine mammals species are represented at sites spanning the past 5000 years. Of particular interest are the remains from the northern fur seal; one of the most important discoveries of northern fur seal bones occurred at Año Nuevo.

Sea otter remains at Late period coastal sites increased in frequency over Middle period Año Nuevo Phase sites. The range of bone elements indicated that they were most likely hunted more for their furs than their meat. It is likely that they were harpooned among the kelp beds from tule reed boats. Although this watercraft was unsuitable for open sea, at least one historic account mentions that they were used offshore below the sheltered reach of Point Año Nuevo.

The local coastal economy remained constant until AD 1100. Shortly after that date, the coastal way of life began to change. Other Native California Indian groups from the interior areas of the state created a higher demand for various shells that were used as markers for wealth and status. The shells gave the coastal groups a valuable trade item. Evidence of this trade was discovered in an archaeological site at Big Basin Redwoods SP with the discovery of five projectile points that were made from obsidian that came from Napa. This stone tool source supplemented local Monterey chert, some of which was quarried from a partially submerged Monterey chert outcrop at Año Nuevo SR.

Ohlone Lifeways

The San Mateo coast lies within the ethnographic territory of the Ohlone Indians, who were organized into at least 50 politically autonomous tribal groups that spoke several distinctly different dialects and are believed to have lived in the area for more than 10,000 years before Spanish contact. The Ohlone's cultural sphere existed within the San Francisco and Monterey Bay regions. The Spanish colonists were not interested in the individual traits of the various tribes and collectively referred to the many seaside tribal communities as Costeños or coastal people. Later writers coined the term Costanoan: an old term that is still sometimes found in recent literature

Research has shown that the Año Nuevo area was a political entity recorded by the Spanish missionaries as the *Quiroste* (produced Keer-osh-tee) nation. The Quiroste were a part of the larger Ohlone group. Information about the Quiroste can be found in historic accounts and, more importantly, from the archaeological sites scattered throughout the landscape.

The Quiroste were a significant and wealthy tribe in the central California coast region. This wealth was based on the bountiful resources and location of their territory. The location that the Quiroste tribe called home was situated between the rocky coast and forested coastal mountains. Their wealth was derived from the materials for tool-making and currency found on their territory. The preferred material for stone tool making in the region was Monterey chert. The main quarry for Monterey chert was located on a seldom exposed reef off of Año Nuevo Point. The Quiroste became the sole suppliers of this highly prized lithic material to the surrounding regional tribes. Another source of their wealth were olivella shells, which were used as currency in prehistoric California. As the olivella shell bead currency trade began to expand throughout prehistoric California in the mid to late Archaic Era, the Quiroste gathered the shells from their coastal environs and monopolized the developing prehistoric economy. In essence, they became the treasury of these shells and could control the export of this highly valued resource. These assets and wealth, along with their natural territorial fortifications of mountains and sea, allowed the Quiroste to establish their strength and prominence as a tribe.

At the time of first contact, Ohlone populations were organized into extended families or clans, which formed villages. Within the villages, clan members ascribed to different clubs or societies. Membership usually involved initiation where novices learned the customs of the organization and used shell beads to pay dues. Different membership-driven organizations sponsored ceremonial events, each having its own distinctive costumes and regalia. Abalone (*Haliotis*) shell pendants were frequently used as badges of membership and rank.

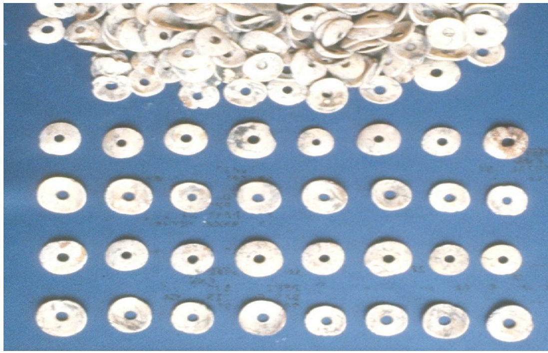
Together the various social organizations formed the fabric of society and directed the storage and redistribution of surplus food resources, constructed village buildings, planned hunting

strategies, and followed the seasonal cycles of nature that would determine where and when they should relocate themselves. Both men and women could be members of various societies and, among larger communities, an elite group of women, called *Mayden*, directed the construction of large circular dance houses that were excavated several feet below the surrounding ground level. The *Mayden* chose the most virtuous individuals to represent various spiritual forces that were personified in dances and ceremonies. This practice was called *Kuksui*. Kuksu dancers wore woven feather bandoleers made from woodpecker quills placed edge to edge that draped over their foreheads and down their shoulders.

Young children were initiated into the various societies and were taught proper manners and customs acceptable to their community by their elders. Once membership was invoked, they earned status and rank over the term of their lives.

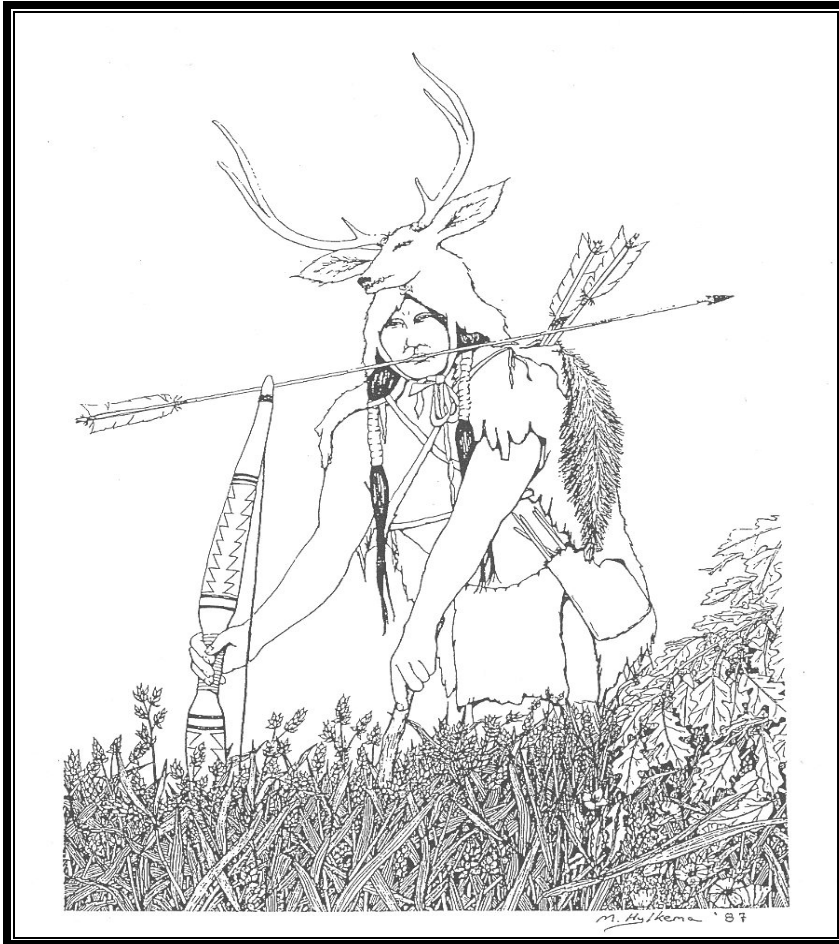
Women had elaborate geometric lines and patterns tattooed over their chins, neck, and shoulders to identify their clan affiliation, and to prevent improper attention from a suitor who otherwise might not be aware of her social standing. Men wore their hair long, and often had long beards and moustaches. Both men and women used sharpened and polished deer bone pins to hold their hair into various fashionable styles. Both occasionally adorned themselves with polished circular stone disks that were inserted in their ear lobes or nasal septum. Most had their ears pierced and wore decorations of brightly colored feathers and bird bone tubes. Finely woven fibers of milkweed were used to make hairnets that sometimes were covered with feathers or shell beads.

Men typically governed the political structure of the village and did the hunting while women handled the gathering and processing of vegetal foods. Each village had a head man and the many villages throughout the Santa Cruz Mountains and coast each had its head man. Feuds between members of some villages were not uncommon, but relatives sought to avoid conflicts through payments made in shell beads, pictured below.



Men wore little or no clothing, a trait common among hunting people who must avoid retaining the human scent so that they could better blend in with their natural surroundings. Women wore a braided tule reed skirt with a rear apron made from finely tanned deerskin.

Houses called *ruk* and/or *tac* were constructed of tule reeds that were tightly thatched and woven over a framework of willow poles. Every house had an indoor and an outdoor hearth and underground oven. Many fist-sized river cobbles were used to distribute heat in the ovens where plant bulbs, shellfish, and animal meats could be roasted. Long poles with painted rings of black, red and white, and brightly colored feathers were erected in the cemeteries adjacent to the villages. Each village also had a partially underground, roofed sweathouse, where interior fires steamed the occupants like a sauna. This was where the men spent a lot of their time telling stories and repairing their hunting tools. Bows were kept in the sweathouse where the smoke kept the human scent off them. When a woman had just given birth, both she and the newborn spent their first few days together resting on a bed of herbs within a special sweathouse, where they could keep warm together.



Ohlone Winter Camp. M. Hylkema, 1988.

The Ohlone economy reflected a mixture of hunting and gathering. Along the coast, they hunted small animals, such as rabbits, as well as marine mammals, such as sea lions. Occasionally, whales washed ashore and were hurriedly butchered by the people before numerous grizzly bears were attracted by the scent. The Ohlone communally hunted elk, deer, and, at times, bears, and they were also avid fishermen, catching salmon and trout from streams, as well as surf fish from the ocean. Mussels and other shellfish were also a major source of food. Acorns, where available, were gathered, leached and made into meal and gruel. On the coast, small seeds including clarkia and tarweed were substituted for acorns as a food source. The Ohlones would burn the land in order to clear the underbrush and promote the growth of seed-bearing annuals.

Exact Ohlone population figures are not known. While some writers suggest a population of 7,000 at the time of Spanish contact, the actual figure could be as high as 10,000.

There was a village named Ssatumnumo along Pilarcitos Creek, probably near the town of El Granada. It was purportedly a favorite fishing ground for salmon and steelhead. The village was within the tribal territory of the Chiguan group. The Ohlone there crossed Montara Mountain to visit with inhabitants of the Pruristac village on San Pedro Creek—near the Sanchez Adobe in Pacifica. A shell midden on the bank of Martini Creek, near Montara State Beach, still marks the site of an Ohlone campsite. Another village, named Shahlaihme, was near Purisima Creek, which was controlled by the Cotegen group. Milliken (1983; 1991), noted that the Chiguan held an area of approximately eight square miles (13 kilometers) from Point Montara to Pilarcitos Creek. A third village was named Chagunte, and was probably located near Pillar Point.

Arrival of Europeans

The prominence of the Quiroste tribe at Año Nuevo was heightened by their role in a significant European contact event in history. In October 1769, an ailing expedition led by Gasper de Portola of Spain entered the Quiroste village on Whitehouse Creek. The Quiroste welcomed the foreign visitors and nursed them back to health. That expedition reported a village of 200 individuals on Whitehouse Creek, which may have been the village of Mitine. Father Juan Crespi, diarist for the expedition, was impressed with the friendliness of the Quiroste, who gave Spaniards “tamales made of black seeds” to relieve their hunger. Crespi described the Quiroste as being “fair and well formed,” and noted that some of them were bearded.

After a few days the Quiroste offered guides to the expedition and led them out of their territory. The Portola Expedition went on to “discover” the great bay of San Francisco. If the Quiroste had not welcomed and cared for the explorers, the expedition might not have gone on to San Francisco Bay.

Native seed-producing grasslands were once a dominant feature of the coastal tablelands. Hard seeds from the grasslands were harvested and could be stored to provide food for extended duration and were milled into edible flour by grinding them between a flat stone milling slab and handstone.

Native people from throughout California managed the landscape through the application of fire to increase seed food production. After the grasslands were burned in late summer, new and improved vegetal growth would attract game like deer, elk, pronghorn, quails, doves, and

other animals, which facilitated hunting strategies by concentrating game into predicable locations.

Eyewitness accounts by the first Spanish explorers indicate that the people of Pillar Point also managed their environment through the use of fire. While passing by the area of Fitzgerald Marine Reserve in 1769 (just prior to the expedition's discovery of San Francisco Bay), Father Juan Crespi commented on this practice. Crespi wrote; "Close to the shore ran tablelands and flat-lying hills of very good soil and grass, though the latter all burnt, for the heathens burn off everything in order for a better yield of the grass-seeds they eat."

In the winter of 1772, a subsequent expedition followed the route traversed by the earlier Portola expedition of 1769. Father Francisco Palou wrote in his diary of an encounter with the Chiguan of Half Moon Bay, probably at the arroyo of Pilarcitos Creek. Palou wrote:

> At two in the afternoon we came to a fifth arroyo. A little before reaching it we saw near the beach two heathen, who as soon as they spied us scampered to their village which they have in an arroyo. Then about fifteen heathen came out from it armed with bows and arrows. As soon as we came to them the commander (Rivera y Moncada) made signs, inquiring why they came with bows. Then one of them, who no doubt was the leader, gathered up the bows and sent them by another person to the village. They asked us if we were going to halt there, and when we told them that we would stop on the other side of the arroyo, they showed us the descent, which is very steep and deep, as is the ascent. We halted near the cliff, which has good pasturage, although there is a lack of firewood, but the heathen provided us with all that was necessary, carrying it from the canyons behind the hills.
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> The village is built right in the arroyo on a high mesa something like an island, and from the plain neither it nor even the channel of the arroyo is visible. Doubtless they live in this place to free themselves from the winds and cold, from which they are well protected. The village does not seem to be large, judging from the few houses which it has, as well as from the small number of adult people who permitted themselves to be seen, who did not exceed 20. They remained in the camp the rest of the day, very ready to do whatever they were requested, bringing wood and water, the first one to volunteer being the chief. They speak very few words of the language of Monterey, and I understood almost nothing that they said. Only by signs did I learn that they have their (principal) village in the mountains and that they are camped in this arroyo only temporarily. We tried to ingratiate ourselves with them by glass beads and some little gifts which they greatly esteemed. The commander gave the chief a little piece of cloth which he greatly prized. The women and children did not come to the camp, but remained all the afternoon in sight, on the cliff, on the other side of the arroyo, which is where they have the path to go down to the village. A little before nightfall they were told to go to the village to sleep, which they did, asking us if we were leaving the next day.
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> December 7—In the morning it was misting the same as it had been doing nearly all night, and for this reason the march was suspended. About ten o'clock it stopped raining. The heathen now came with their presents of some large baskets of thick atole made of acorns and some large tamales made of their black seeds. The chief brought a boy of his about twelve years old, whom I tried to please with glass beads and other little gifts, for which his father effusively expressed his thanks. The commander did

> the same. They remained at the camp all day, where they ate dinner, and I noticed a great liking for our foods. When they went back to the village the commander told them that we were going to leave the next day and that if they wished to come with us to show us the fords of the arroyos they should come early. They volunteered gladly to do this and withdrew to their houses (Palou, in Bolton 1930:II:435-437).

To the south, there were other major villages—one located near the Pescadero Community Center, one near Pigeon Point, and one farther south, along Whitehouse Creek in the Año Nuevo area. The village of Zucigim was possibly at San Gregorio, which was in the territory of the Oljon group (from which the term Ohlone was derived). It is likely that another village existed near the Pescadero Marsh, where a midden has been located in the dunes.

With the advent of Spanish colonial expansion and the coming of the historic period, the strength and prominence of the Quiroste tribe was challenged. The Spanish Missions subjugated the native coastal people; this resulted in dramatic environmental changes, while poor nutrition and repeated exposure to introduced diseases decimated their population.

Eventually, seven missions were founded in Ohlone territory, and the native people were forced to live and work in the missions. The Quiroste committed the only armed resistance against the northern Franciscan Missions of California when they attached Mission Santa Cruz in 1791. This unsuccessful resistance resulted in the Quiroste becoming one of the last tribes of the area to be incorporated into the Mission system.

Slightly later, under Mexican rule, the large mission land holdings were broken up and distributed to private ownership as the missions were "secularized."

Some of the former Indian neophytes continued for a while to manage what remained of the increasingly decaying missions and work as laborers at the new ranchero estates. Ultimately, they blended into the Hispanic communities. During the subsequent American Period, after Statehood in 1848, they became invisible to the larger American society. Nonetheless some survived and their descendants continue to live in the region.

Today the descendants of the mission people use the designation of Ohlone to encompass the families from as far south as Soledad and Monterey, all the way northward to Livermore and San Francisco. Some of the Ohlone have further subdivided into discrete family groups, such as the Carmel Band of Rumsen, the Pajaro Valley Indian Association of Watsonville, the

Mutsun of San Juan Bautista, the Amah Band of Gilroy, and the Muwekma Tribe of Santa Clara Valley. They continue to identify themselves as the Ohlone people and visit our State Parks.

(Much of the content for this module was taken from the 2008 Año Nuevo State Park General Plan. We gratefully acknowledge significant input from Mark Hylkema, CA State Parks Archeologist.)